

THE SEARCHERS*

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ON May 6, 1578, the Lord Mayor of the City of London issued "A precept for avoydinge the infection of the plague." One of the steps to be taken was to

appoynte two honest and discrete matrons within everye pish [parish] . . . wch shalbe sworne trulye to search and make viewe of the bodye of anye such psons [persons] as shall happen to dye within the same pish, to the entent they maye make true reporte to the clarke of the parish of all such as shall dye of the plague, That the same maye make lyke report and certificate to the wardens of the pish clerke.¹

The term *searcher* was not new. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites use of the word before 1500 to designate customs officers, sanitary inspectors, market inspectors, and so on. Searcher, in the sense of one who searches bodies for signs of plague or other causes of death, does not seem to appear in London records before 1578, but searchers are said to have been referred to in Shrewsbury in 1539.²

The Lord Mayor of London issued in 1581 an order almost identical to that quoted above.³ The vestry minutes of the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, for September 1593, a plague year, mention the appointment of male searchers for men's bodies and female searchers for the bodies of women.⁴ This seems to be the only record of male searchers.⁵ The parish records of St. Botolph without Aldgate for March 26, 1594, tell of the activities of searchers,⁶ and Shakespeare refers to "the searchers of the town" in *Romeo and Juliet*, written in 1596 or 1597,⁷ so the term was by then well established.

Sometimes the women employed by the parish to inspect a body were said to "view" it. For example, orders issued during a minor outbreak of plague in London about 1570 specified that "Two Vewers of

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dead Bodies, two vewers of Sick suspected, shall be appointed and sworne.”⁸ The churchwardens’ accounts for St. Benet Gracechurch in 1578 speak of payment to “two women to vew the corpse of the same wyfe.”⁹ In 1592 it was directed in the City of London that “in or for every parishe there shalbe appointed two sober Ancient Woemen to be sworne to be viewers of the boddies of such as shall dye in tyme of Infecon, and twoe other to be viewers of such as shalbe sicke and suspected of Infecon.”¹⁰

There was repeated mention of searchers in the seventeenth century.¹¹ In 1603 the appointment and swearing in of searchers was authorized by Royal Statute.¹² A letter written in December 1630 by the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen of the City of London to the Privy Council, reporting various activities in connection with efforts to control the plague, said the searchers “appointed for the vissitted houses are ancient woemen; And reputed to bee both honest and skilful, who are sworne for the faithful discharging of their duties in their seaverall places, which uppon certificate it appeareth, they have carefully performed.”¹³

An order in 1665, the year of the Great Plague, from the mayor and aldermen tells us a good deal more about the searchers.

That there be special care, to appoint Women-Searchers in every Parish, such as are of honest reputation, and of the best sort as can be got in this kind: And these to be sworn to make due search and true report, to the utmost of their knowledge, whether the Persons, whose bodies they are appointed to Search, do die of the Infection, or of what other Diseases, as near as they can. And that the Physicians who shall be appointed for cure and prevention of the Infection, do call before them the said Searchers who are or shall be appointed for the several Parishes under their respective Cares, to the end they may consider whether they are fitly qualified for the employment; and charge them from time to time as they shall see cause, if they appear defective in their duties. That no Searcher during this time of Visitation be permitted to use any publick work or employment, or keep any shop or stall, or be imployed as a Laundress, or in any other common imployment whatsoever.

The last sentence obviously reflects the fear that a searcher might herself become a carrier of disease. The order continues:

For better assistance of the Searchers, for as much as there hath been heretofore great abuse in reporting that Disease, to the further spreading of the Infection: It is therefore ordered, that there be chosen and appointed able and discreet Chirurgions, besides those that doe already belong to the Pest-house: amongst whom, the City and Liberties to be quartered as the places lie most apt and convenient: and every of these to have one quarter for his Limit: and the said Chirurgions in every of their Limits to joyn with the Searchers for the view of the body, to the end there may be a true report made of the Disease. And further, that the said Chirurgions shall visit and search such like persons as shall either send for them, or be named and directed unto them, by the examiners of every Parish, and inform themselves of the Disease of the said parties, And for as much as the said Chiurgions are to be sequestred from all other Cures, and kept onely to this Disease of the Infection; It is ordered that every of the said Chirurgions shall have twelve-pence a Body searched by them, to be paid out of the goods of the party searched, if he be able, or otherwise by the Parish.¹⁴

This 1665 order is of particular interest. The searchers had serious deficiencies, and these had attracted official attention. That the aged women should be selected and supervised by physicians sounds like a good if belated idea, but there seems to be little evidence that this new regulation was implemented. The fact was that the searchers were paid inadequately, were not trained for their responsibilities, and sometimes shirked what was at best an unpleasant job. If they reported a death caused by plague, the house was quarantined and its occupants were placed under other restrictions. So the searchers might be offered, and might accept, a bribe to report another cause for death.¹⁵ An order from the Lord Mayor on July 20, 1590, had noted that "there is great suspicion . . . the weekely certificates . . . of such dye within this Cittie were not truely reported especially those which are supposed to dy of the Plague."¹⁶ John Graunt, founder of the science of vital statistics, in his analysis in 1662 of the London Bills of Mortality expressed little confidence in the reliability of the searchers.¹⁷ They were defended, but not very convincingly, by John Bell, Clerk of the Company of Parish Clerks, in 1665.¹⁸

Although the "ancient women" were originally appointed to search

for signs of plague, gradually they began to report other causes of death as well. In at least one London parish, causes of death were being recorded regularly by 1583. The practice was fairly widespread by 1607.¹⁹

The searchers took an oath of office.²⁰ During the Great Plague of 1665 they swore to make careful search of bodies for the cause of death and to report promptly to the constables of the parish and to the bearers who would remove the corpse. "You shall not make report of the cause of anyone's death better or worse than the nature of the disease shall deserve." The searchers had to promise to live together and as far as possible to shun the company of others, including their families, carrying a white wand at all times so that they could be recognized and avoided.²¹ A heavy task indeed. Church records show that in 1578 two searchers were paid 4d. each for "viewing the corps" and an equal amount for searching another body.²² In another parish in September 1617 "two fit aged women" searchers were "to have ij^d a peece for everie bodie they shall vew and search to be paid by the governor of the house where such bodie dieth and is vewed, and if they shall not be able to paie the said iiij^d then the said money is to be satisfied and paid by the Collector for the poore for the time being."

By 1625 the fee in this parish was 4d. for each searcher.²³ In another parish the weekly salary for one male searcher was 6d. For a second male searcher it was 12d., and for two women searchers it was 18d. each.²⁴ There is no explanation for the apparent discrimination. In a third parish a searcher was paid £1 for working for two weeks. The parish record also itemizes: "Paid for ij potts of beare for the Chirurgeon and searchers afore they went into the house [of a sick person] . . . ij^d."²⁵ These were all London parishes. In Reading searchers were paid 4s. a week in 1625, a plague year, and 4s. "a moneth after the ceassing of the plague."²⁶ By comparison, it has been estimated that at about 1650 a mason earned 16 to 18d. a day and a laborer, 10 to 12d.²⁷ Since the searchers were forbidden other employment, their incomes must have been very meager and certainly gave no compensation for the risks involved.

The law dealt harshly with errant or uncooperative searchers: "These vewers to reporte to the Constable, he to the Clarke, and he to the Chiefe of Clark; all upon Pain of Imprisonment. A Paine of standing on the Pillorye for false Reports, by the Vewers; a Loss of Pension to such as shall refuse."²⁸ A few years later, in 1581, the lord mayor of London ordered that "If the viewers through favour or corruption shall give

wrong certificate, or shall refuse to serve being thereto appointed, then to punish them by imprisonment in such sorte as may serve for the terror of others.”²⁹ In 1592 it was directed that every woman searcher

for any corruption or other respecte falsely reportinge, shall stande uppon the Pillory, and beare Corporall payne by the Iudgemente of the Lord Maior and court of Aldermen

That evry woman or other appointed to any service for the infected and refusinge or faylinge to doe that service, shall not have any Pension owt of the hospitall.³⁰

The number and variety of these penalties imply continuing problems with the searchers.

There were further difficulties. The searchers reported, it was said, only what they heard. “For the wisest person in the parish would be able to find out very few distempers from a bare inspection of the dead body, and could only bring back such an account, as the family and friends of the deceased would be pleased to give.”³¹ A correspondent in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* in 1799 complained: “In two parishes, which I could point out, the searchers cannot write; the mistakes they make are numberless, in the spelling christian and surnames, for, they trust to memory till they get home; then, child or neighbour writes what they suppose it to be.” Even the “search” was perfunctory: “they only look at the face, enquire the disorder, and receive their fee.” In one such case, the deceased had died in suspicious circumstances, and someone notified the coroner. The searcher was questioned at the inquest.

Q. How did you examine this body?

A. In the usual way; by looking at the face and feet.

Q. What, did you not turn up the shroud, and examine the body all over?

A. No, it is not customary, without we have suspicion.

Coroner. Well, then, as you seem to be ignorant of your duty, I must acquaint you that, by law, you must examine strictly: you are appointed by the parish for that purpose; and, if you do not do your duty, I am authorised to commit you to Newgate³²

Not all searchers were so negligent. Ann Dunn and Mary Small were called to an inquest and testified in February 1801 to careful examination of the body of a woman whose death, it was suspected, had been violent.³³

But generally the searchers failed in their duties. A bitter article

in *The Penny Cyclopaedia* called for reform, citing the incompetence and occasional drunkenness and dishonesty of the searchers.

The fee which these official characters [searchers] demand is one shilling, but in some cases *two* public authorities of this description proceed to the inspection, when the family of the defunct is defrauded out of an additional shilling. They not infrequently require more than the ordinary fee; and owing to the circumstances under which they pay their visit, their demands are generally complied with. In some cases they even proceed so far as to claim as a perquisite the articles of dress in which the deceased died. Such are the means at present employed in collecting medical and political statistics in the metropolis of England.³⁴

Relief from this situation finally came in 1836 when the Registration Act was passed.³⁵ It called for the registration of all births, deaths, and marriages in England. This law does not mention the searchers, but when it became effective on July 1, 1837, the office of searcher became obsolete.

Because of the frequent incompetence and unreliability of the searchers, one might be tempted to dismiss them rather briefly as historical curiosities. But this would fail to recognize their importance in relation to the vital statistics of the 16th through early 19th centuries in England. The information passed on by the searchers to the parish clerks for ultimate tabulation in the Bills of Mortality came, for better or for worse, mostly from the searchers, although others could also make mistakes. Thomas Short, 17th century physician, observed, "In all Bills or Tables of Casualties and Diseases, some of the Totals are always lost, either from the Diseases of some being concealed from the searchers, or not returned to the Clerk's-Hall, and overlooked by them, or not fit to be mentioned, as *Fluor albus*, *Lochia*, *Menses nimii*, & c."³⁶ Even when a searcher conscientiously did her best, her understanding and description of a fatal disease could seldom be anything but that of a layman. Hence, the "causes" of death that appear in the Bills of Mortality and, exceptionally, in parish records, are recorded in lay terms and indeed are, far too often, not diseases but symptoms—"decline," "fever," "dropsy," "convulsions," and the like.³⁷ But such information is the best we have and, indeed, can tell us a great deal.

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